

Southern Pacific Depot
559 El Camino Real
San Carlos
San Mateo County
California

HABS No. CA-2278

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SOUTHERN PACIFIC DEPOT
HABS No. CA-2278

Location: 559 El Camino Real, San Carlos, San Mateo
County, California.

UTM: 10.565500.4151220
Quad: San Mateo, Calif. 7.5'

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Date of Construction: 1887. Porte cochere removed, and
original wood floor replaced by concrete
slab in 1937. Interior alterations by
railroad and subsequent business tenants
at various dates.

Present Owner: California Department of Transportation
Rail Management Branch
P.O. Box 7310
San Francisco 94120

Present Use: Restaurant and rail passenger shelter.

Significance: The Southern Pacific Depot at San Carlos
is a rare example of the use of the
Richardsonian Romanesque style in
California railroad station architecture.
It was the first permanent building
erected by the San Carlos Land Company to
form the nucleus for their speculative
town development.

Historian: John W. Snyder
Chief, Architectural and Historic Studies
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Office of Environmental Analysis
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Sacramento CA 95825

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

In 1887, the San Carlos Land Company was formed to finance the development of their speculative townsite west of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The company erected the depot as their first permanent building, as an inducement to prospective buyers.

In June 1888, the railroad laid a 1,200 foot long spur track at the depot site for the unloading of building stone, to be shipped by rail from San Jose. By July, the first material had begun to arrive, and construction commenced in August 1888, undertaken by masons and laborers who had been working on the construction of nearby Stanford University. That same month, the San Mateo County Times and Gazette published the following account of the project.

San Carlos Station. A Description of What Will be the Finest Depot in the state. The promises made by those who are interested in the new town of San Carlos on the Phelps tract, are being rapidly fulfilled, and in a few months more the nucleus of the proposed model suburban town will be fairly planted.

The laying out and grading of the streets has been going on for several months, and that work is now completed. The streets running north and south are sixty feet wide, while those running east and west are fifty feet.

Sewer pipes are now being laid along the streets running to the marsh. The next move will be to lay water-mains from the Spring Valley pumping works throughout the town. Water will be taken from the stand pipe now being erected on the hill-side near the works, which is of such an elevation as to give a fall of over fifty feet to the highest point in town. All of this work and more too, will be completed before the lots are offered for sale.

Last Tuesday, ground was broken for the new depot which is to be built at the lower end of the avenue leading to the residence of T.G. Phelps. The building will be 101 feet long by 30 feet wide and will be built of Almaden rock, the roof being made of tiles.

On the ground floor will be four rooms, a baggage room, waiting room, ladies' parlor and ticket office. There will be a tower twenty-seven feet high over the ticket office, in which will be a small bedroom. Running through the building from east to west will be an open space twenty-nine feet wide, which will separate the baggage room on the south from the other apartments. All of the rooms will be of ample accommodations. The baggage room will be 14x25-1/8 feet, and

the ladies' parlor, which is to be situated in the northern section of the building adjoining the ticket office, will be 10x12 feet. The ticket office will be in the form of a half circle extending beyond the main building. It will cover a space of 9x16 feet. Large settees will be placed in the waiting room, on the outside of the building and in the open space. At the rear will be a large covered driveway. The ceiling will be thirteen feet high, and although it has not yet been decided what kind of wood will be used on the interior, it is supposed that the finishing will be of curled redwood and ash. Around the building will be a concrete pavement twenty-four feet wide on the sides and fifty feet long on either end. At either extremity of the building will be beautiful flower-beds and grass-plots, which will make the entire grounds 600 feet long. The depot when completed will be one of the finest in the State. In architecture it will resemble the Spanish buildings of the early days.

It is assured that before another year has passed, many of the residences will be erected, and the new town of San Carlos which promises to be a credit to the county, will be firmly established.

By January 1889, the depot was nearing completion, with the cost then noted as \$8,000, and reference again made to "tiled roofing."

Completion of the depot, however, failed to stimulate the expected rush of buyers, and the town remained essentially stillborn until after the turn of the century, when the San Carlos Improvement Company assumed the reins, published promotional brochures, and finally stimulated development.

There is little mystery as to the failure of the initial development. California was in the depths of a building depression in the last years of the 19th century, and the timing could not have been worse to attempt promotion of a suburban town. The real mystery surrounding the San Carlos Depot is: who designed it? The clues point to Charles Allerton Coolidge, of the Boston architectural firm Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge.

At the time of the building of the San Carlos Depot, the Boston firm had secured what was then surely the most desirable architectural commission in Northern California, if not in the entire state: Stanford University, planned by Senator and Mrs. Stanford as a memorial to their late son. The parents had secured the services of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead for site planning, and Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge for execution of the building plans. The architectural firm was the direct successor firm to Henry Hobson Richardson, as all three of the principals had been in the employ of Richardson at the time

of his death in 1886. Coolidge became the principal in direct charge of the Stanford commission, and spent considerable time in California on the project.

The Stanford buildings reflected both the background of the architects and the influence of the client. Though the buildings, of quarry-faced ashlar sandstone masonry construction, clearly had their roots in the Richardsonian idiom (with some directly traceable to specific Richardson antecedents), the use of low arcades and Spanish tile roofs also marked Stanford's attempt to emulate the heritage of California's Franciscan missions. Stanford discussed the buildings as "an adaptation of the adobe building of California...an architecture distinctly Californian in character." Newspaper articles appeared in 1887 describing the architecture as "Spanish." As noted earlier, almost the same reference was made in connection with the then-building San Carlos Depot. Use of this somewhat unusual description for what would have, up to this time, been termed Richardsonian Romanesque designs, would seem to be more than merely coincidental.

The University buildings were built of yellow sandstone taken from the Levi Goodrich quarry south of San Jose, the same quarry which supplied the stone for the San Carlos Depot. Though for reasons yet unclear, the depot was roofed in dark gray cut slate, the original design called for the use of Spanish tiles as at Stanford. (Indeed, a rendering of depot appearing on an 1887 map of San Carlos depicts it with a tile roof, and the resemblance to the University buildings is unmistakable; a subsequent map, drawn just after the depot's completion, shows it with the slate roof.) And, as noted, the same stone masons and laborers built both the depot and the University.

Another clue lies in the maturity of the Richardsonian design of the depot, completed at a time when California architects had just begun to experiment with the style. The depot's design reflects a sure hand, one familiar with the style and familiar with its materials.

There are further ties to Stanford as well. The president of the San Carlos Land Company was Captain N.T. Smith, Treasurer of the Southern Pacific Railroad (of which Leland Stanford was one of the original builders), and a long-time personal friend of Stanford. The two had run a mercantile business together in the Mother Lode during the Gold Rush. It is quite possible that Smith may have arranged to have Stanford's architect execute the design for his depot during one of Coolidge's trips to California. Coolidge was in the state at the right time for this to have occurred.

Another clue takes negative, rather than positive, form. As

noted previously, building in California was in the throes of a depression, and the local architectural community was quite vocal in trying to make the opposite appear to be the case. Local architectural papers discussed major commissions in detail; they published lists of building commissions and ascribed them to architects (though many of these "architects" were not connected with the building trade in any way), in an attempt to make the business appear more healthy than it was. Yet, conspicuously absent was any discussion of the Stanford commission. This, without doubt, reflected the disgruntlement of the local architects at the awarding of the most lucrative architectural commission of the decade in California to the Boston firm, without so much as a local competition. Coolidge undertook another commission during one of his trips, again a lucrative one for his firm: a major office building in San Francisco for Wells, Fargo, & Co., again in the Richardsonian Romanesque style. And, once more, the lack of mention of this commission by the local architectural community was conspicuous. The depot, which finally cost \$10,000, was by no means a minor commission. Yet it, too, received almost no professional notice. The California Architect & Building News briefly noted the building in 1888 in a list of commissions, but did not list an architect; no discussion accompanied, and mention of the building in this most important publication did not occur again until a photo of the depot was published in 1892, again without text or mention of an architect. Professional jealousy could be strong, indeed.

On the opposite side of the argument, the present firm of Shepley, Bullfinch, Richardson, and Abbott, successors to Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, has no record of their predecessors obtaining a commission for the depot. Their archivist did state, however, that it was not impossible that Coolidge may have undertaken the design on his own, independent of the firm, which indicates some precedence exists for this type of action. Clouding the picture further is the fact that another of the officers of the San Carlos Land Company was Arthur Brown, Chief of Buildings and Bridges for the Southern Pacific Railroad. While it is possible that Brown could have executed the design or caused company architects to do so, the fact remains that Brown had never worked in this style, and is not known to have done so afterward. The typical Southern Pacific depot of the period under Brown's hand was a standard-plan, wood frame structure. Without firm evidence, the San Carlos Depot can only be attributed to Coolidge; still, the clues all point in that direction.

The San Carlos Depot is listed in the National Register under Criteria A and C: for its role in the early development of the town of San Carlos, for the quality of its architecture, and for the rarity of its style for California railroad buildings.

Its design reflects a sophisticated and highly artistic expression of the Richardsonian Romanesque style of architecture. The use of this style for a railroad station, while common in the East, was exceedingly rare in California. It is a good example of its type, period, and method of construction and is a rare example as well. The San Carlos Depot is the only station on the San Francisco Peninsula to use stone masonry construction, or to employ the Richardsonian Romanesque idiom.

The depot served as a catalyst for the development of San Carlos as a commuter-oriented suburban community. San Carlos was the only town on the Peninsula at that time whose economic base relied on a commuting population rather than upon local industry or commerce. The town grew slowly, however, and as late as 1906 the depot was the only public building in town and the center of its social activity. Over the years it has served as the town's first community church, library, and post office, while operating continuously as a railroad station until 1967.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Constructed in the Richardsonian Romanesque style in 1888, the Southern Pacific Depot at San Carlos is a one-story stone masonry building with a two-story tower on the trackside (northeast) facade. The building consists of separate depot and baggage rooms joined by a covered breezeway. The multi-hipped roof is clad in cut slate, and has sawn redwood ridge cresting details and sheet metal finials. The tower is crowned with a conical roof; the semi-circular bow window section at first story level served the station operator, while the circular section of the tower at second story level contained a tiny living space. Semi-circular arched fenestration, characteristic of the Richardsonian Romanesque, dominates the trackside elevation. Except for minor alterations to the building and removal of the original landscaping, the depot retains its original appearance and fabric, giving it a remarkably high degree of integrity.

Multi-light windows placed in a large semi-circular arch illuminate the waiting room from trackside, while coupled windows provide illumination from the breezeway and streetside facades. The transom over the northeast entrance consists of a multi-light window within a semi-circular arch. The massive semi-circular arch is also repeated in the fenestration of the baggage room door. Tower fenestration is rectangular, with 4-light single-hung windows surmounted by 15-light fixed sash at first-story level; the lower sash at the center of the operator's bow window also contained a mail drop slot. The upper portion of the tower is lit by 15-light pivotal windows. The remaining fenestration is rectangular, consisting of single and coupled 15/4 double-hung windows topped by multiple-light transoms.

The eaves of the main roof are broad and projecting, supported by lathe-turned knee braces which are fastened to vertical timbers set on projecting stone ancons. The main hipped roof wraps around the tower between the first and second story fenestration. The eaves of the conical tower roof are boxed and supported by a decorative wooden dentil course. The projecting bay at the northwest end of the building, originally housing the ladies' waiting room, also has clipped, boxed eaves above a wooden entablature strip. Other details include: two stone chimneys in the main block of the building; large sandstone voussoirs forming the arch rings of the various fenestration; a projecting rounded stone base course; and redwood gutters.

The building is only slightly altered: a porte cochere on the southwest (streetside) facade was removed in 1937, and a portion of the porte cochere entrance porch has been enclosed in stucco walls, tinted and scored to imitate the original stone masonry. The extent of past interior alterations is unknown, as the station was used as a real estate office after 1967, and was in an altered state when acquired by the present owner.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

E. Mahany, Through the Years in San Carlos, San Mateo, 1965.

Walkup, San Carlos Land Company Map, San Francisco, 1887, 1889.

K. Weitze, California's Mission Revival, Los Angeles, 1984.

American Railway Bridges and Buildings, Chicago, 1898.

"Town and County," San Mateo County Times and Gazette, June 9, 1888; July 28, 1888; August 4, 1888; September 1, 1888; January 12, 1889.

"San Carlos Station," San Mateo County Times and Gazette, August 4, 1888.

"Among the Railroads," [San Francisco] Daily Alta California, August 4, 1888.

"Country Building News," California Architect & Building News, July 15, 1888.

Personal communication with Mr. Woodman Taylor, archivist, Shepley, Bullfinch, Richardson and Abbott, December 1983 and January 1984.

"Articles of Incorporation, San Carlos Land Company," Archives of the Secretary of State of California, Sacramento.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Carlos Depot is an element of the Caltrain Peninsula Commute Service Station Improvement Project. When the California Department of Transportation assumed responsibility for operating the San Francisco/San Jose rail commute service previously provided by the Southern Pacific Railroad, the decision was made to acquire the existing Southern Pacific stations along the line, and to undertake improvement of buildings and grounds, and to provide better interface between other public and private transportation modes and the Caltrain service. In connection with work to be performed on those stations on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, Caltrans adopted the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation as agency policy, and executed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Urban Mass Transportation Administration and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

At San Carlos, rehabilitation work was carried out by the Direct Construction Unit of the Office of the State Architect, using day labor. The Unit includes restoration specialists who are called in when the work involves an historic building. Completed in 1985-6, the work at San Carlos included the following: removal of the deteriorated slate roof, installation of a plywood sub-roof to enhance seismic performance, and complete in-kind replacement of the slate; complete in-kind replacement of milled redwood gutters; paint analysis (carried out by Caltrans specialists) to determine the original paint scheme, and repainting of wood trim elements in that scheme; structural repairs to the tower skirt roof; in-kind replacement of deteriorated wooden roof crest trim pieces, using historic trim pieces found stored in the tower; replication of missing baggage room doors; repointing as necessary; chimney repairs. Adaptively reused, the depot now houses a restaurant, and functions for rail passengers simply as a shelter.

As a final note, the stations chimneys were damaged in the October 17, 1989 earthquake. At the time of this writing, they are scheduled for careful removal to roof level. The chimneys will be photographed, and the stones match-marked prior to removal. After removal, the stones will be stored off-site while the Office of the State Architect prepares a design for reinforced reconstruction of the chimneys using the original stones. In the interim, the openings will be capped to prevent water damage to the remaining upper course of stone.

Floor Plan Sketch (no scale)

